Negotiating Sustainability: Environmental Conflicts in the Swedish Cement Industry, 1970–Present

Malin Dahlström
Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden

Abstract

The cement industry is a large-scale industry producing one of the essential building materials, cement. Over recent decades, the environmental impact of the cement industry has been debated on various levels, both globally—where the cement industry is one of the highest emitters of carbon dioxide— and locally, where limestone extraction threatens groundwater and natural values. It was in the early 1970s that environmental issues related to the cement industry began to gain prominence in the public debate. This article examines the conflicts surrounding environmental issues in the Swedish cement industry from the 1970s up to the present. In many cases, environmental values have been weighed against job opportunities and local development. At the same time, the cement industry has argued that Swedish cement production is more sustainable than that in other countries. The different dimen sions of sustainability serve as a basis for analyzing the conflicts in which the cement industry has been involved. The material used to map these conflicts primarily consists of newspaper articles and publi cations from within the cement industry itself. Access to archival material is limited, but it will be used wherever possible.

The article aims to explain the background to the current situation facing the cement industry. In the summer of 2021, news broke that the major Swedish cement plant in Slite on Gotland would not be granted a new permit for limestone extraction, which would mean that cement production at the plant would cease. The government then found a special solution to ensure continued access to limestone for the plant, and parliament made specific exemptions in the Environmental Code. Since then, a time limited permit for extraction has been issued. In this process, various interests clashed, and the debate in both the media and society was intense. Last year the factory was granted at long-term permission for extracting limestone, but there is still conflict concerning different issues related to the factory and the establishment of a proposed CCS facility. Previous conflicts, the government and Parliament's han dling of the cement industry, and the actions of the monopoly company will be described and analyzed in an attempt to explain the current situation.